

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-11

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INFO AMEMBASSY AMMAN
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AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS
AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV
AMEMBASSY LONDON
AMCONSUL JERUSALEM
USMISSION USUN NEW YORK

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 1 OF 2 BEIRUT 2882

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PEPR, LE, PINT
SUBJ: THE LEBANESE CABINET CRISIS, APRIL 19 TO MAY 15:
PLUS CA CHANGE, PLUS C'EST LA MEME CHOSE

1. SUMMARY. THE LEBANESE CABINET CRISIS FROM APRIL 19 TO MAY 15 HIGHLIGHTED A NUMBER OF THE PROBLEMS FACING LEBANON TODAY -- THE COMPLEXITY OF THE POLITICAL EQUATION, THE POWER OF THE TRADITIONAL SECTARIAN LEADERS, PARTICULARLY CAMILLE CHAMOUN, AND THE RELUCTANCE OF PRESIDENT ELIAS SARKIS TO ACT FORCEFULLY AND TO TAKE ANY RISKS. END SUMMARY.

2. THE HOSS CABINET, WHICH HAD BEEN IN OFFICE SINCE DECEMBER 1976, OFFERED ITS RESIGNATION ON APRIL 19, THE DAY AFTER A MEETING OF RECONCILIATION BETWEEN FORMER PRESIDENT CAMILLE CHAMOUN, THE LEADER OF THE LEBANESE (CHRISTIAN) FRONT, AND FORMER PRIME MINISTER SAEB SALAM, THE TRADITIONAL AND NOMINAL
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LEADER OF LEBANON'S CONSERVATIVE SUNNI MUSLIM COMMUNITY. THIS MEETING, THE FIRST BETWEEN THE TWO MEN IN MORE THAN TWO YEARS, WAS WIDELY ACCLAIMED BY THE LEBANESE PUBLIC, WHICH WAS DESPERATELY HOPING FOR SOME KIND OF POLITICAL RECONCILIATION, AS A FIRST STEP TOWARDS NATIONAL UNITY. THE HOSS GOVERNMENT, WHICH HAD BEEN UNDER PRESSURE FOR MANY WEEKS BECAUSE OF ALLEGED INADEQUATE PERFORMANCE, AND WHICH HAD BEEN

PARTICULARLY CRITICIZED BECAUSE IT ACQUIESCED IN THE SHELLING OF THE BEIRUT SUBURB OF AYN AR-RUMMANAH BY SYRIAN ADF FORCES APRIL 9-13, ANNOUNCED THAT IT WAS STEPPING DOWN TO GIVE THE POLITICIANS THEIR CHANCE TO CREATE A GOVERNMENT OF NATIONAL UNITY.

3. INITIALLY, IT APPEARED THAT THE POLITICIANS MIGHT IN FACT GET TOGETHER. ON APRIL 27, THE PARLIAMENT PASSED, BY A VOTE OF 74-0, A WATERED-DOWN VERSION OF A SIX-POINT STATEMENT OF PRINCIPLES LIMITING THE ACTIVITIES AND PRESENCE OF NON-GOL ARMED ELEMENTS, INCLUDING THE PALESTINIANS IN LEBANON (BEIRUT 2305). THERE WAS SPECULATION THAT SARKIS MIGHT ASK SAEB SALAM, WHO WAS THE CHRISTIAN CANDIDATE, TO FORM A NEW GOVERNMENT BUT THE SYRIANS, WHO HAVE BEEN ANNOYED AT SALAM EVER SINCE HE PUBLICLY SUPPORTED THE SADAT INITIATIVE, PROBABLY VETOED THIS. IN ANY CASE, SARKIS BYPASSED THE TRADITIONAL SUNNI LEADERS AND CHARGED PRIME MINISTER HOSS WITH THE TASK OF FORMING A NEW AND MORE POLITICAL CABINET. FOR THREE WEEKS HOSS MET CONTINUALLY WITH LITERALLY SCORES OF PARLIAMENTARY DEPUTIES AND POLITICAL LEADERS IN AN ATTEMPT TO WORK OUT A CABINET OF POLITICAL LEADERS THAT WOULD SATISFY EVERYONE. IN THE END, HIS EFFORTS FAILED, PRIMARILY BECAUSE CAMILLE CHAMOUN ADAMANTLY REFUSED TO PARTICIPATE IN OR AGREE TO ANY CABINET WHICH INCLUDED MEN HE CONSIDERED SYRIAN REPRESENTATIVES, SUCH AS ASSEM KANSU AND KAMAL SHATILA. IN THE FACE OF CHAMOUN'S INTRANSIGENT POSITION, SARKIS WAS UNWILLING

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TO FORCE THE ISSUE. WHEN IT BECAME CLEAR THAT NEITHER SIDE WOULD BUDGE, SARKIS AND HOSS FINALLY DECIDED THAT THE ONLY SOLUTION WAS TO RETURN TO THE STATUS QUO ANTE AND "REFLOAT" THE FORMER CABINET. (SOME CYNICAL OBSERVERS HAVE REMARKED THAT THE FORMER CABINET WAS REFLOATED "BELLY UP".)

4. PRIME MINISTER HOSS HAS TRIED TO PUT THE BEST POSSIBLE FACE ON THINGS. IN AN INTERVIEW WITH RADIO LEBANON ON MAY 17, HE SAID QUOTE I DO NOT CONSIDER THE CABINET'S WITHDRAWAL OF ITS RESIGNATION TO BE A RECTIFICATION OF A MISTAKE. THE RESIGNATION WAS A NECESSARY POLITICAL DECISION AT THE TIME, AND THE WITHDRAWAL OF THE RESIGNATION WAS ANOTHER POLITICAL DECISION WHICH WE CONSIDER TO BE MORE SUITED TO THE CIRCUMSTANCES UNDER WHICH IT WAS TAKEN. BY RESIGNING WE HOPED TO ACHIEVE TWO THINGS. THE FIRST WAS TO GIVE THE POLITICIANS THE CHANCE TO ASSUME GOVERNMENT RESPONSIBILITY, AND THE SECOND WAS TO ACTIVATE THE POLITICAL SITUATION AND BREAK THE CIRCLE OF INACTION WHICH HAD BEGUN TO SURROUND THE GOVERNMENT'S WORK ...DESPITE THE FACT THAT THE CABINET'S RESIGNATION GAVE THE POLITICIANS THE OPPORTUNITY TO ASSUME GOVERNMENT RESPONSIBILITY, AND DESPITE THE FACT THAT WE WORKED HARD -- AND GOD IS OUR WITNESS -- FOR THE FORMATION OF A COALITION CABINET OF POLITI-

CIANS, THE ATTITUDES OF CERTAIN POLITICIANS AND THE CONDITIONS AND COUNTERCONDITIONS MADE BY THEM CREATED COMPLICATIONS, PROBLEMS AND OBSTACLES IN THE WAY OF FORMING A NEW CABINET. THIS WAS PREVENTED THE MATERIALIZATION OF THE RESULT WE HAD HOPED FOR, NAMELY THE FORMATION OF A COALITION CABINET REPRESENTING ALL POLITICAL TRENDS. WE WERE NOT THE SOURCE OF THE COMPLICATIONS AND OBSTACLES. UNQUOTE.

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5. REACTIONS: THE CHRISTIAN POLITICIANS HAVE STATED PUBLICLY THAT THE ARE SATISFIED WITH THE RETURN OF THE HOSS GOVERNMENT. ALTHOUGH CHAMOUN IN PARTICULAR HAD PRESSED HARD FOR A NEW CABINET OF "GIANTS" (MEANING A SMALL NUMBER OF TRADITIONAL POLITICAL LEADERS, INCLUDING HIMSELF AS THE SOLE MARONITE) OR A CABINET DRAWN FROM MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT, THE RETURN OF THE HOSS TEAM WAS PREFERABLE FROM HIS POINT OF VIEW TO A NEW GROUP WHICH WOULD INCLUDE THE "SYRIANS." CHAMOUN WAS EVEN QUOTED AS WONDERING WHY THE CABINET HAD RESIGNED IN THE FIRST PLACE SINCE THERE HAD BEEN NO PUBLIC PRESSURE FOR IT TO DO SO.

6. MANY OF THE MUSLIM AND LEFTIST POLITICIANS, ON THE OTHER HAND, WERE ANNOYED AND UPSET. THEY HAD BELIEVED THAT THE OPPORTUNITY THEY HAD BEEN WAITING FOR TO OBTAIN REPRESENTA-

TION FOR THEMSELVES. THEY WERE ANGRY THAT CHAMOUN HAD BEEN ABLE TO THWART THEM AND THAT SARKIS HAD BEEN UNWILLING TO OVERRIDE CHAMOUN'S OBJECTIONS.
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7. THE CABINET MEMBERS THEMSELVES ARE FOR THE MOST PART RESIGNED TO OR PLEASED WITH CONTINUING IN OFFICE FOR AT LEAST ANOTHER FEW MONTHS. MINISTERS SALMAN (INTERIOR AND HOUSING) AND CHEAITO (PUBLIC HEALTH AND WATER AND ELECTRICAL RESOURCES) GIVE THE IMPRESSION OF MEN WHO ARE QUITE WILLING TO STAY IN THE CABINET, ALTHOUGH THEY WOULD BE PLEASED TO PASS ON ONE OF THEIR PORTFOLIOS TO SOMEONE ELSE. MINISTER BOUTROS HAS TOLD SOME FRIENDS THAT HE WOULD LIKE TO QUIT, BUT WE SUSPECT HE WOULD NOT BE UNHAPPY TO CONTINUE AS MINISTER OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS IS SOMEONE ELSE COULD BE FOUND TO TAKE THE DEFENSE PORTFOLIO. THE CLEAR EXCEPTION IS MINISTER DOUMIT (INDUSTRY AND AGRICULTURE), A MILLIONAIRE MARONITE BUSINESS MAN, WHO LEFT FOR THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA THE DAY AFTER THE CABINET'S RESIGNATION WAS FIRST ANNOUNCED ON APRIL 19 AND HAS STILL NOT RETURNED.

8. THE PUBLIC REACTION TO THE RETURN OF THE HOSS CABINET HAS BEEN A COMBINATION OF RELIEF THAT THE GOVERNMENT CRISIS IS FINALLY OVER, COUPLED WITH DISAPPOINTMENT THAT IT HAS ONCE AGAIN BEEN IMPOSSIBLE FOR PRESIDENT SARKIS TO RECONCILE MAJOR COMPETING POLITICAL FACTIONS. THE PUBLIC SEES THIS AS ANOTHER SIGN OF SARKIS' WEAKNESS. MANY LEBANESE OBSERVERS SAY THAT SARKIS HAS FAR MORE POWER THAN HE REALIZES BUT THAT HE IS AFRAID POLITICALLY AND PERHAPS PERSONALLY OF CHAMOUN.

9. COMMENT: IT IS HARD TO SEE HOW PRESIDENT SARKIS IS EVER GOING TO GET OUT OF THE SNAKE PIT OF TRADITIONAL LEBANESE POLITICS WITHOUT CUTTING OFF A FEW HEADS. A RECENT ARTICLE IN THE BEIRUT ENGLISH LANGUAGE WEEKLY MONDAY MORNING ATTEMPTED TO SUM UP PUBLIC OPINION IN THE WAKE OF THE LAST THREE YEARS' EVENTS IN LEBANON. THE ARTICLE'S CONCLUSION, WHICH FITS THIS EMBASSY'S PERCEPTIONS, IS THAT 90 PERCENT OF THE LEBANESE OF
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ALL CONFESSIONAL GROUPS, INCLUDING MARONITES AS WELL AS SHIA, WOULD BACK SARKIS IF HE WERE TO DEFY THE TRADITIONAL POLITICAL LEADERS, APPOINT A CABINET OF HIS CHOICE AND GO DIRECTLY TO THE COUNTRY FOR SUPPORT. ADMITTEDLY, THIS IS NOT EASY TO DO; EACH POLITICAL LEADER AND CONFESSIONAL SECT IN LEBANON HAS ITS OWN CONNECTIONS WITH OUTSIDE FORCES -- THE ISRAELIS, THE

SYRIANS, THE LIBYANS -- AND SARKIS MUST CONSIDER THEIR REACTIONS
AS WELL AS THOSE OF THE VARIOUS PALESTINIAN GROUPS WHO PLAY
SUCH A LARGE PART IN THE POLITICAL LIFE OF LEBANON TODAY.
NEVERTHELESS, UNLESS SARKIS UNDERTAKES SOME DRAMATIC MOVE SOON
TO REUNIFY THE LEBANESE BODY POLITIC, THE MOMENTUM TOWARDS
PARTITION WILL CONTINUE TO BUILD AND THOSE WHO WOULD LIKE TO
TAKE THE FUTURE OF THE COUNTRY INTO THEIR OWN HANDS WILL BE
ENCOURAGED TO DO SO. AT PRESENT, THERE ARE NO SIGNS THAT
SARKIS INTENDS TO TAKE SUCH AN INITIATIVE. SARKIS' FORTH-
COMING MEETING WITH SYRIAN PRESIDENT ASSAD MAY PROVIDE SOME
CLUES. LANE

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